

To what extent was Hitler's foreign policy 1933-1939, responsible for the outbreak of World War II?

While Hitler's foreign policy was the primary cause of WW2, there were many other contributing factors, such as Britain and France's policy of appeasement and the weakness of the League of Nations. These conditions aided the aggressiveness of Hitler's foreign policy and altogether they eventually led to the deadliest war in human history. Europe was devastated after World War I, and this devastation influenced many of the decisions made by European powers for the next twenty years. Many countries feared another war, and Hitler used this fear to his advantage, continuously risking war to achieve his foreign policy goals. Hitler's main policy aims were to destroy the Treaty of Versailles, something he had aimed to do since he achieved power. He also planned to create a 'Greater Germany' or Grossdeutschland by uniting all German-speaking people, and to create Lebensraum, living space in Eastern Europe to help make Germany self-sufficient. In Mein Kampf, Hitler made these goals clear, but it still took years before the Allies recognized it, and eventually declared war.

The Treaty of Versailles was a huge source of humiliation for Hitler and Germany, and Hitler was desperate to break the harsh restrictions imposed by it. Initially, he proceeded cautiously in foreign policy and was seen as a man of peace, and so when he began rearmament in 1935, this was the first aggressive step in his foreign policy measures. He also introduced conscription and announced the existence of the Luftwaffe, which up until then was a secret. All of these measures were forbidden under the Treaty. Britain, France, and Italy formed the Stresa Front in fear of German expansion, yet months later this was undermined by Britain as they signed the Anglo-German Naval Agreement. Under this agreement, Hitler was able to increase it's navy to 35% of the British navy, and have the same amount of naval boats as the British. This agreement was spurred on by the general feeling present in Britain, a feeling that Germany was treated harshly under the Treaty of Versailles. One of Hitler's first real steps in destroying the Treaty was one made with the agreement and support of Britain, which set a precedent of how both nations proceeded with foreign policy for years to come. This agreement also weakened relations between Britain and France as it had been made without their consultation. Hitler's next bold step was the Remilitarisation of the Rhineland in 1936. This was banned by the Treaty of Versailles and agreed to by Germany by the Locarno Pact. In March of 1936, he moved 10,000 troops into the Rhineland. The League of Nations condemned this action but did nothing else, occupied with the Abyssinian crisis. France was most threatened by this action but refused to act without support from Britain, which they did not get. Again, Britain felt pity for Germany and viewed this as the Germans going into their own back garden, allowing Hitler to continue to break the Treaty of Versailles, and further weakening Anglo-French relations. The remilitarisation also allowed Germany to build the Siegfried Line, a line of fortifications protecting Germany from French invasion and allowing him to focus on Eastern Europe. These were the first steps in Hitler's foreign policy, and his risk-taking, France's reluctance to act alone and Britain's pity for Germany were seen again and again as Hitler became bolder in his foreign policy, and inched closer to war.

In November of 1937, Hitler met his senior military commanders, and in the notes recorded by Colonel Hossbach in the Hossbach Memorandum, Hitler outlined his plan to overthrow Austria and Czechoslovakia, using a method of internal disruption and outside pressure. Austria was a German-speaking country and so Hitler wanted to unite it with Germany under his policy of Grossdeutschland. In 1938, using the aforementioned method, he encouraged the Austrian Nazi Party to demand union with Germany (internal disruption), and he demanded the Austrian Chancellor legalize the Nazi Party and appoint Dr. Seyss-Inquart minister of the Interior (outside pressure). The Austrian Chancellor, Dr. Schuschnigg was forced to agree, but decided to hold a plebiscite on a union with Germany, knowing the citizens of Austria would reject it. But Hitler acted before this could take place, and forced the resignation of Schuschnigg, and took over Austria. Unsurprisingly, one month later, a Nazi-supervised referendum took place and produced a 99.75% vote in favor of the Anschluss. This union strengthened Hitler's relations with Italy, as Mussolini had signed the Rome-Berlin Axis and supported the Anschluss despite previously fearing Hitler's rising power. Britain also supported the union, as they felt the Austrians and Germans had a right to be united. This proved again, that Hitler could take a risky step and have it supported by other European powers, as their fear of another war held them back from any real action.

Following Hitler's plan of creating a Grossdeutschland, he also wanted to unite Germany and the Sudetenland. The Sudetenland was a German-speaking part of Czechoslovakia which included 3 million Germans. The Sudeten Germans complained they were discriminated against, and their leader, Konrad Henlein demanded to be united with Germany, and he was encouraged and supported by Hitler sending troops to the border. But, Czechoslovakia had a modern army and strong defenses. They also had a military alliance with France, and Britain and Russia had pledged their support. France favored action in response to German threats, but Britain was cautious. The Munich Conference was organized to pull Europe back from the brink of war. In September 1938, Chamberlain, (Britains Prime Minister), Daladier (France), Mussolini and Hitler met to decide the fate of the Sudetenland. Neither Czechoslovakia nor the Soviet Union was invited. All four leaders agreed that the Czechs had to relent and give Sudetenland to Germany. Chamberlain returned to Germany with "peace for our time", Daladier with the same sentiment and Hitler returned with a dangerous confidence that neither France nor Britain would back their words with action. Hitler had brought Europe to the brink of war and forced Britain, France, and Czechoslovakia to bend to his will. His military forces had also strengthened considerably as the Sudetenland had held most of Czechoslovakia's heavy industries and military defenses. Hitler's foreign policy actions continued to succeed, and Europe inched closer to war.

Britain's reluctance to act and France's refusal to act alone is characteristic of the policy of appeasement both countries adopted after World War I. Britain believed if they gave into Hitler's demands they would prevent another war, and they felt that disarmament and the League of Nations were the best way to achieve peace. Many British people also felt that Germany had been treated too harshly in the Treaty of Versailles, and it was this mindset that allowed the Anglo-German Naval Agreement to go through and allowed the remilitarisation of the Rhineland. Hitler and Nazi Germany were also seen as a barrier to the spread of communism. At the same time, Britain was going through a period of economic depression

and was reluctant to spend money on rearmament and the military. The French supported appeasement for the same reason, and they too wanted peace. However, France was also affected by the 'Maginot Mind', the belief that France would be safe behind the Maginot Line, a system of fortifications built along the eastern border with Germany. This policy of appeasement is a contributing factor in the outbreak of World War II and allowed Hitler to progress with his aggressive foreign policy until they finally took action. It wasn't until March 1939, when Hitler took over the rest of Czechoslovakia that Britain and France began to slowly revise their attitude towards Germany. Germany had broken the terms of the Munich Peace Conference, and Britain and France had merely protested, showing the weakness of appeasement. Britain now knew that Hitler's aims were not as limited as they previously thought, but that he, in fact, sought European domination. In response, they secretly increased the pace of their rearmament. Hitler's takeover of Czechoslovakia is a pivotal moment in the buildup to World War II, as it was the defining action that showed to Britain the weakness of their policy of appeasement, and Hitler's true intentions.

Hitler's invasion of Poland was the eventual catalyst for World War II. The Treaty of Versailles had separated this section of land, called East Prussia, from the rest of Germany by the Polish Corridor. After WWI, as countries were divided up and boundary lines were drawn, Poland was given access to the sea through the port of Danzig. Hitler demanded the return of Danzig, and a rail link to East Prussia through the Polish Corridor. Poland rejected Hitler's demands, and in March 1939, Britain and France agreed to support Poland. But, Hitler's confidence in the weakness of Britain and France's policy of appeasement was strong, and he didn't believe they would act. Hitler's real worry lay in the possible actions of the Soviet Union. Stalin was worried about the safety of Russia since Hitler's rise to power, but he did not trust Britain and France after the exclusion of Russia from the Munich Conference. Instead, the foreign ministers of Russia and Germany, Molotov, and Ribbentrop signed the Nazi-Soviet Pact, a decision that shocked the world. This pact was a ten-year non-aggression pact, which allowed Hitler to invade Poland without Russia intervening. They also secretly agreed to divide Poland between themselves. The arch-enemies of Fascism and Communism had agreed to not attack each other for ten years. While it may have looked like both countries were working together, in reality, Hitler used the pact as protection against a two-front war, allowing him to concentrate on fighting Britain and France in the west, without worrying about Russia in the east. Russia then agreed to the pact, as it allowed Stalin to prepare his armies for war, as both countries knew that war would be inevitable, and the pact was really a way of biding time. Hitler now had everything in his favor; he had the Siegfried line protecting him in the West, and the non-aggression pact protecting the Eastern front. He was sure that Britain and France would not act, and soon the 1st of September 1939, Hitler invaded Poland and to his surprise, two days later Britain and France declared war. Britain and France were determined to back war if necessary, and their opinions had quickly changed after Hitler's invasion of Czechoslovakia. Europe was once again at war.

The League of Nations had been set up after World War I to ensure peace in Europe, with a mission statement that included upholding the rights of man, disarmament, collective security, and settling disputes but in reality, they achieved nothing in their measures to stop dictators such as Mussolini and Hitler. This is due to the League not having an army to enforce decisions, and major powers being absent from the League. The U.S declined to be in the League, and so immediately a large world power was missing. As time went on other powers

were only members for brief periods of time, and as Hitler ramped up his aggressive foreign policy, Germany left the League. The League also met only 4 times a year, making quick action almost impossible. Each member was reluctant to impose actual sanctions on countries that violated the mission statement, and without the U.S.'s membership as an international trading partner, weak economic sanctions were imposed and never on oil, which was vital fuel to a country that was invading another, such as Mussolini invading Abyssinia, or Hitler invading Czechoslovakia. The weakness of the League and their reluctance to take any hard measures in stopping the actions of Hitler was a large factor that led to the outbreak of war. It's possible that if the member states had worked harder towards collective security and imposed harsher sanctions, the League could have perhaps stopped Hitler's rise to power and his aggressive foreign policy.

Hitler is not the sole cause of the outbreak of World War II, but he is the primary cause. Britain and France turning a blind eye to his aggressive expansionist policies, the ineffectiveness of the League of Nations, and the U.S.'s policy of isolationism are large contributing factors in the lead-up and eventual outbreak of the War. While other countries adopted a policy of appeasement, the U.S adopted one of isolation, where they retracted from Europe's problems. The U.S became focused solely on the affairs of its own continent, and they rejected the Treaty of Versailles and did not become a member of the League of Nations, a concept they themselves created. The isolationist policy adopted by the U.S is also a contributing factor to the war, as their presence in the League would have strengthened its power and use of sanctions. The second World War would not have occurred without Hitler, however, despite their wishes to the contrary, many of the other European powers had large roles in the outbreak of most horrific war in history.